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(54) Title: SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR AN INTERNET-BASED CONSUMER-TO-BUSINESS VALUE CYCLE

(57) Abstract: An information trading marketplace receives offers from businesses requesting market research and other information that it then transmits to consumers interested in receiving these solicitations. A consumer chooses which offers to respond to and then provides the requested information for the agreed upon price.

SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR AN INTERNET-BASED
CONSUMER-TO-BUSINESS VALUE CYCLE

RELATED APPLICATIONS

The present application claims the benefit of the following provisional patent applications, all of which are hereby incorporated by reference in their entirety: serial no. 60/164,565 entitled INFO TRADER filed on November 10, 1999 by Randolph Grube; serial no. 60/168,746 entitled E-COMMERCE VALUE CYCLE filed on December 6, 1999 by Randolph Grube; serial no. 60/168,747 entitled C-TO-B INTERNET BUSINESS PROCESS filed on December 6, 1999 by Randolph Grube; and no. 60/200,341 entitled INFOTRADER filed on April 28, 2000 by Randolph Grube.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to acquiring market research information and more particularly to a system and method for an Internet-based consumer-to-business value cycle.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The advent and popularity of the Internet as an environment for commerce has created opportunities for communication between businesses and consumers that have previously been unknown and unexplored. However, because of the comfort brought by familiarity and businesses' typical aversion to risk, the models of communication that have been developing over the Internet remain similar to the models of communication over more-traditional media. In these models, the consumer

continues to be viewed solely as a target for a product or service and as contributing nothing of value except the "potential to consume."

Current retailing practices continue in Internet-enabled e-tailing models. Stores make on-line catalogs and order forms available for consumers to purchase goods. This model is referred to as business-to-consumer (or B-to-C) and perpetuates the business' view of the consumer as merely someone who purchases products or services.

Business-to-business models (B-to-B) over the Internet leave the consumer out of the picture entirely and do not give the consumer the opportunity even to "consume".

On-line auctions and similar models have recently surged in popularity and can be classified as a consumer-to-consumer model (C-to-C). While this models offers one of the consumers the opportunity to provide a product or service, the transaction, in this global yard-sale model, is severely limited in both scope and duration.

Some limited consumer-to-business models (C-to-B) have been investigated by on-line companies recently. However, these attempts remain one-sided and impersonal from the view of the consumer. Some examples include businesses that pay consumers some incentive for a name and address and the right to contact the consumer with traditional-type marketing material being sent soon thereafter. Other examples include businesses that pay consumers to web-surf certain sites or to view particular advertisements.

There is a need for providing the consumer an opportunity to participate in a consumer-to-business transaction model that recognizes and rewards a consumer for the economic value and assets which the consumer can directly offer the business in addition to their "capacity to consume".

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention stems from the realization that consumers, too, have something valuable to offer businesses -- information about their product needs and preferences. A consumer-to-business model is described in which businesses pay consumers for providing market research information regarding products and services. Market research information includes, for example, information useful to a business for creating, designing, improving, promoting, pricing, or distributing existing or proposed goods or services. The information gathered can then be used to refine subsequent information gathering efforts and improve a product or service offering, ultimately culminating in the business generating an offer for sale of a product or service that meets the consumer's needs and desires and is therefore very likely to succeed.

This iterative cycle of market research information gathering, labeled the value chain cycle, recognizes the value of the market research information provided by a consumer and rewards the consumer for it. The relationship between the consumer and the business not only rewards the consumer but also rewards the business. The free-market model, herein described, improves the quality and quantity of market research data available to businesses and allows the businesses to build genuine relationships with consumers by conducting better research, performing more precise and relevant marketing activities, creating a more compelling sales process, and retaining consumers more effectively at a lower cost.

Accordingly, one aspect of the present invention relates to a method and software for trading information which includes receiving an offer, from a business, for market research information about a product or service. Market research information includes information relevant to a business in determining what products

and services consumers want, what features and characteristics are popular, and which consumers, in particular, want which products and services. The product or service could already be in existence with the business searching for new marketing opportunities; or the product or service could be planned for future release with the business researching what features and designs will provide the most return on investment. The offer can request information in a number of different ways including, but not limited to, surveys, questionnaires, on-line chat sessions, free-form comments to advertisements, focus groups, etc. The offer, regardless of its particular form or content, is then transmitted to one or more consumers who choose whether or not to respond with the requested market research information. The consumers who reply with the requested data are directly compensated for the information they provide.

Privacy is very important to many Internet users. In one embodiment, accordingly, a determination is made regarding which consumers to transmit the offer to before transmitting the offer to the one or more consumers. A privacy policy associated with each consumer is used to filter out offers from unwanted companies, offers from unwanted types of companies, offers which may be from desired companies but of an unwanted nature, and offers which do not provide at least a predetermined level of compensation.

Another aspect of the present invention relates to a method of trading information which includes receiving consumer bids in response to offers from businesses. Initially, an offer requesting market research information about a product or service is transmitted to one or more consumers. In response, bids are received from the one or more consumers which indicate that additional compensation will be needed to motivate the consumers to respond with the requested market information. After eventually agreeing on adequate compensation, the requested market research

information is received and the consumers are rewarded based on the negotiated compensation.

A further aspect of the present invention relates to a method for formulating an offer for sale over a computer network. The method includes transmitting an initial request for market research information to target consumers and compensating those who reply with the requested information. Based on the replies, another request for market information is generated and sent to target consumers who are compensated when they reply. The refinement of further requests for additional market research information can continue for as many iterations as the parties want. After the final iteration, an offer for sale of a product or service is then formulated, based on the additional market research information, and presented to the target consumers. The statistics relating to the acceptance or rejection of the offer for sale by the target consumers is tracked to provide even more market research information to a business. In addition, the offer for sale can itself include an offer requesting even further market research information thereby allowing the business and the consumer to develop a one-on-one relationship and "prime" the value chain cycle.

Additional objects, advantages, and novel features of the present invention will be set forth in the description that follows, and in part, will become apparent upon examination or may be learned by practice of the invention. The objects and advantages of the invention may be realized and obtained by means of the instrumentalities and combinations particularly pointed out in the appended claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The present invention is illustrated by way of example, and not by way of limitation, in the figures of the accompanying drawings and in which like reference numerals refer to similar elements and in which:

FIG. 1 illustrates a web site which implements the information trading marketplace according to certain embodiments of the present invention.

FIG. 2 is a flowchart illustrating an exemplary market information trading transaction.

FIG. 3 illustrates an exemplary licensing arrangement with a telecommunications provider using the present information trading marketplace.

FIG. 4 illustrates an exemplary licensing arrangement with another web-site operator using the present information trading marketplace.

FIG. 5 illustrates an exemplary licensing arrangement with an Application Service Provider (ASP) using the present information trading marketplace.

FIG. 6 is a diagram that depicts a computer system that can be used to implement one embodiment of the present invention.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

A method and system for paying consumers for market research information are described herein. In the following description, for purposes of explanation, numerous specific details are set forth in order to provide a thorough understanding of the present invention. It will be apparent, however, to one of ordinary skill in the art that the present invention may be practiced without these specific details. In other instances, well-known structures and devices are shown in block diagram form in order to avoid unnecessarily obscuring the present invention.

GENERAL WEB-SITE STRUCTURE

Referring to FIG. 1, a web site is illustrated with a high-level view of an online information marketplace that provides consumers and businesses a way to

trade market research information for rewards. In particular, the exemplary information marketplace is implemented utilizing a web site 120.

In the illustrated embodiment, consumers 102 and 104 and businesses 116 and 118 interact with each other through an information marketplace web site 120 coupled to networks 106 and 114, respectively. One consumer 102 may communicate with the web site 120 using a conventional computer, while another consumer can 104 communicate with the web site 110 over a wireless connection using a portable telephone or other hand-held device. The web site 120 includes a databases 112a-c for storing information such as consumer accounts, consumer profiles, security policies and transaction histories. The databases 112a-c, although depicted as co-located, represents storage of a number of related and unrelated databases which may or may not be physically co-located. In general operation, a business that would like to engage in a marketing relationship with a consumer determines what market research information, in particular, the business wants and how much the business is willing to compensate each consumer who provides it; these elements are used to create an offer or solicitation for market research information. This offer is transmitted to the marketplace 110 and, using a privacy policy 108 associated with each consumer in the database 112, the marketplace 110 presents appropriate offers to selected consumers. Consumers 102 and 104 access the web site 120 to view offers that meet the criteria the consumers previously specified in their associated privacy policy. It is these conforming offers which are ultimately presented to the consumers. The consumers 102 and 104 are able to review the presented offers to determine if the consumers are willing to provide the requested information for the compensation offered by the businesses 116 and 118. Statistical information regarding the acceptance or rejection of the offer as well as information regarding the consumers who provide the requested information are logged by the database 112 and provided to the business 116 and 118.

A business 116 and 118 then provides the promised compensation to the operators of the web site 120 who, in turn, credit the account of the appropriate consumer.

While the above description provides a general overview of the operation of the information marketplace, the following explanations and subsequent figures provide specific details and variations of the above-described operation.

USER REGISTRATION

In some implementations, a consumer first registers with the information marketplace 110 before being able to receive offers from requesting businesses. Preferably, when an unregistered consumer arrives at the web site 120, a link or page is provided allowing the consumer to participate in the registration process. Help screens and overview pages are also provided to educate the consumer regarding the registration process if needed.

During the registration process, the consumer provides personal information and preferences which can be utilized during subsequent transactions in the information marketplace 110. One example might be to use the provided information to identify a group of consumers that are eligible to receive a particular offer that a business wants to post. The provided information might include a username, gender, zip-code or area-code, age and an e-mail address. Other information such as a group affiliation number or a referral number might also be requested. To entice consumers to register and provide this information, a financial reward may be offered by the web site 120 for completing the registration questionnaire. The financial reward can be cash or other incentives, such as stock shares or other "ownership rights" in the web site 120.

Additional demographic and lifestyle information regarding a consumer can also be requested to enable a more refined audience targeting on the part of

businesses, thereby increasing their likelihood of taking advantage of the information marketplace 110. In recognition of this economic asset in the control of the consumer, additional compensation may be offered to a consumer for providing such additional profile information. This additional data may include household size, income levels, home ownership, credit card information, and hobbies. In practice, different hierarchies of compensation are available to consumers based on the level of details the consumers are willing to disclose during registration. Pages or links are also available to allow currently registered users to augment or change information originally provided during the initial registration process. Once finalized, the registration information is stored in the databases 112a-c.

After completing the initial registration, the consumer is presented with a link or page that allows the consumer to define a personal privacy policy. To simplify the procedure, a default policy is available for those consumers who do not want to define their own policy. Consumers who do want to create a custom policy are presented options, e.g. via an HTML form or a more active-type web page, relating to the types of companies, the types of products, the types of offers, etc. which the consumer is interested in receiving. For example, a consumer opposed to child labor or rain-forest destruction may elect not to receive offers from an offending corporation. This feature empowers the consumer to interact only with those companies which the consumer approves of. Each category of the privacy policy can either be "opt-in" or "opt-out". For example, accepting offers related to all product types might be enabled by default and require a consumer to explicitly select those products to filter out (i.e. opt-out); or a consumer might have to explicitly identify those products regarding which the consumer wishes to receive offers (i.e., opt-in).

The privacy policy also includes a number of settings which control how the businesses 116 and 118 and the information marketplace 110 are allowed to interact

with a consumer. A consumer can select to be notified of new offers upon login into the site 120 or by a daily (or more frequent) e-mail automatically sent to the consumer's e-mail address. The information marketplace 110 includes offers from numerous categories of businesses including automotive, electronics, cosmetics, apparel, footwear, etc. In determining a privacy policy, the consumer has the option of blocking offers relating to certain ones of these business categories. Even within certain desired categories, there may be some companies with which a consumer does not want to interact; the privacy policy will permit this type of specific filtering. By blocking certain interactions, the consumer is given the power to determine which businesses can and cannot access the consumer's profile information in the databases 112a-c. The effect of blocking a business's access to a consumer's profile is that the consumer will not receive offers from unwanted businesses; thereby controlling the consumer's privacy at the level the consumer specifies. A consumer is also able to set the minimum level of compensation necessary for an offer to be posted to the consumer. A pull-down menu or text-entry box can easily provide this functionality. Consumers are also able to select which types of information requests the consumer would like blocked. A consumer may choose to participate in surveys but not in focus groups; or the consumer may select only to receive invitations for chat sessions while blocking all questionnaire-type offers. The consumer, through their associated privacy policy, controls how the consumer participates with the information marketplace 110. Once a privacy policy is defined, it is stored in databases 112a-c and associated with the consumer with which it corresponds. Web-based provisions are also provided at the site 120 to allow a consumer to edit or update their personal privacy policy.

TRADING MARKET INFORMATION

Once consumer profiles and privacy policies are in place, the information marketplace becomes available for trading and fostering relationships between consumers and businesses. By way of example, FIG. 2 illustrates the logical flow of an information trading transaction; reference to element numbers from figure 2 being provided to aid with the understanding of the figures.

Businesses 116 and 118 specify groups of consumers that are initially based on the consumer profiles in the databases 112a-c. Using previously gathered demographic, lifestyle, psychographic, and sociographic data, a business provides criteria to the site 120 which, in turn, provides corresponding codes for matching consumers who are willing to receive offers from the requesting business. In this way, a business, in step 202, is able to specify a target audience to receive the initial offer for information. Contact information that would enable the business to identify the consumer outside of the information trading marketplace environment is not provided to the business in order to protect the consumer's privacy. In addition, the consumer's privacy policy filters out those offers that the consumer wishes to avoid.

For example, a shoe manufacturer may be interested in gathering market research information relating to a multi-purpose athletic shoe. In order to determine which consumers to post an offer to, the company specifies that it is first interested in 15-25 year old males. Later the company will wish to focus on those people who identify themselves as active in more than one sport. Some of the people in the specified demographic group, however, may have a privacy policy that screens out all offers from shoe manufacturers because these consumers may object, for example, to the third-world labor policies of these manufacturers.

After the set of consumers is specified who meet the business's specification and the consumers' privacy policies, the business then makes an offer for market research information.

When creating a new shoe, for example, a consumer questionnaire or survey from a shoe manufacturer may include questions such as: do you participate in sports? do you participate in mountain biking? do you use specialty shoes? do you use regular shoes? should we make mountain biking shoes? are mountain biking shoes important to you? how do they rank in comparison to other mountain biking accessories? what should the features of a mountain biking shoe be? If the shoe manufacturer is at a design stage, then exemplary, appropriate questions might include: what colors do you like? what materials do you prefer? why? do you prefer VELCRO™ over shoe laces? To help determine pricing information, consumers might be asked questions such as: what is your annual income/hourly wage? how much money do you spend on hobbies? how much on mountain biking? what are your other hobbies? how much would you spend on mountain biking shoes? when are you looking to buy mountain biking shoes? could we send you information on our shoe?

Each of these solicitations for market research information or requests for an interaction with a consumer, generated in step 204, specifically states the market research information or interaction requested and the compensation, or reward, for that information. In step 206, these offers are forwarded to the web site 120 where they are posted to the appropriate users.

Continuing with the shoe example, the shoe company creates a questionnaire that includes questions regarding which sports the consumer plays, which sports the consumer prefers specialized shoes for, what shoe features are critical for particular sports, and the importance of price to the consumer's decision. The business also determines that the information in a completed questionnaire is worth \$1.00. The

business, therefore, has posted in the information marketplace 110 the offer to pay \$1.00 to answer a questionnaire.

To view offers, in step 208, a consumer logs into the web site 120 using a username and preferably a password or some other type of authorization procedure. After successful login, a consumer enters a personal account area that displays information regarding current and previous offers that are still pending as well as other transaction history. The account presentation page provides icons or other tools that allow a consumer, in step 210, to accept, decline, or otherwise participate with an offer. Both conventional web access and wireless web access to information trading marketplace 110 is made available. Therefore, in addition to conventional web-based communication protocols and methods, the web site 120 can also provide information to the consumer 104 in a manner conducive to wireless access (which is typically a lower-bandwidth connection). Relatively simple HTML, or XML, forms, text-based rather than multimedia data, and menu, multiple choice or "question and answer" style interaction allow a consumer to integrate the information marketplace into their wireless lifestyles instead of requiring them to modify their lifestyles in order to participate in the marketplace.

The acceptance, rejection, and viewing of an offer is tracked and stored in the databases 112a-c and forwarded to the business which posted the offer. Businesses are able to access these transactions and to analyze the data. A business has probably previously determined the number of responses needed for the received information to be meaningful. By analyzing the percentage of consumers choosing to view the offer, the business is able to determine if the offered compensation is enough to initially appear attractive. By analyzing how many consumers who view the offer actually accept the offer, the business can determine if the questionnaire is too lengthy or appears too difficult in relation to the offered compensation. In addition to these

inferential methods of determining market response to an offer, a consumer may also reply with a "bid" to explicitly request from the business higher compensation for providing the requested market research information. To improve the number of consumers responding, the business may decide to repost an offer with higher compensation or to modify the offer in some other way. Businesses are also able to terminate offers when the goal or some purpose of the offer has been attained. Thus, a consumer who views an offer but chooses not to immediately reply, possibly to shop around for better offers, may lose the opportunity to reply at a later time. In this way, a market environment is created where competitive pricing for consumer data maximizes the return for both the business and the consumer and the business is able to establish a one-to-one relationship with the consumer.

In the shoe/questionnaire example, the shoe company might decide that only 100 responses are needed for this initial, fact-finding questionnaire and, therefore, request the web-site 120 to terminate the offer once the company receives 100 replies. Once an offer is terminated in the information trading marketplace 110, a consumer will no longer see notification of that offer when accessing their personal account page.

Once a consumer accepts the offer and provides the specified interaction or information, the business is responsible for the agreed upon compensation in step 212. The transaction logging features of web site 120 ensure that the proper consumers' accounts are credited with the appropriate compensation. Typically, the business will provide the web site 120 with additional compensation for providing the information marketplace service to the consumer and the business. In the on-going example, the shoe company forwards appropriate compensation to the web site whose operators then forward the agreed upon amount to each of the young men who responded to the offer and retain the remainder.

Based on the responses and other extrinsic data, businesses may refine their offers, products, or services and more precisely target the consumers of the information marketplace 110. In step 214, therefore, businesses repeat the previously described steps for soliciting information with the same consumers, a subset of the same consumers, or with a new set of consumers.

In this next iteration of information trading, the business might focus questions to help gather information useful for promoting, distributing or improving goods or services whose design and pricing have already been investigated. Example questions to assist with promotion might include: would you like to hear about our new mountain biking shoe? would you like to hear the great offer we have on our new mountain biking shoe? would you like to be invited to our event (or store event)? would you like to have someone contact you about our new shoe? Questions to gather information related to distributing goods and services may, for example, include: where do you shop for mountain biking accessories? would you also buy your shoes there? would you consider buying from an alternate source? why? why not?

From the initial questionnaire, the shoe company may determine that soccer players and baseball players have similar requirements in their shoes and show some inclination towards considering a single shoe for both sports. An additional questionnaire can then be formulated which might focus on identifying those aspects of the shoe which would improve the chances of a consumer to purchase that shoe. The shoe company also may determine that those consumers who did not indicate, in the initial questionnaire, any interest in either baseball or soccer should be omitted from the second questionnaire. Finally, because of the focused nature of the audience and the second questionnaire, the shoe company may raise the offered compensation to \$2.00 to entice as many consumers as possible to accept the second offer.

From the businesses' perspective, one ultimate goal is to provide a product or service that is highly desirable to the consumer and can be offered for sale, in step 216. The response to the offer for sale implicitly provides its own consumer data; in addition, the offer for sale can include an explicit solicitation for further information. In either case, this interaction with the consumer provides an opening for the business to restart the information gathering cycle in order to consummate another sale. A one-on-one relationship with the consumer is thus created, fostered, and maintained.

For example, along with the offer for sale, a survey with the following exemplary questions can be used by a business to gather information for improving the goods and services as well as the entire sales process: how was your purchasing experience with us/the retailer? what changes do you think we should make to the sales process? would you recommend us/the retailer to a friend/family? do you like the product? how is the design? how is the quality? how does the performance of the product compare to the price? what changes do you think we should make to the product? would you recommend the product to a friend/family? would you consider buying other products from us? what products? would you like us to send you a list/more info?

From the consumer's perspective the ultimate goal is to accumulate compensation from responding to various businesses' solicitations. The compensation for each consumer is stored in the databases 112a-c and available for "cashing-out" at any time. Cashing out can include a check, a credit-card reverse charge, an electronic transfer, e-cash alternatives, or other forms of compensation or rewards.

COOPERATIVE MARKETING ARRANGEMENTS

The relationship-building, information trading marketplace architecture disclosed herein is flexible for use in different cooperative marketing arrangements.

One example cooperative marketing arrangement is depicted in FIG. 3. In this example, a telecommunications company provides marketing over their wireless web network.

Along communications path 352, the telecommunications company 302 allows consumers 306 to sign-up with the information marketplace 304 over the wireless web network. During interaction 354 between the telecommunications company and its business clients, the telecommunications company offers the services of the information marketplace 304 to the company's own business clients 308. Then, using communication path 356, these business clients 308 use the information marketplace to post offers, and develop market relationships, over the wireless web network. Finally, the consumers 306 interact 358 with the wireless web network to access the offers through wireless hand-held devices.

A similar marketing arrangement to that of FIG. 3 is depicted in FIG. 4. In this second arrangement, a web-site operator 402 provides market research information services 404 over their own web site 410 to consumers 406 and business clients 408.

Another marketing arrangement, illustrating an example Application Service Provider (ASP) agreement, is depicted in FIG. 5. In this arrangement, the consumers 506 stay in the ASP web environment 510 of a web-site operator 502 which, locally or remotely, may include hardware for implementing an information marketplace 504. The web-site 510 offers the information marketplace services to its own business clients 508 who can post offers on the web-site 510. Consumers 506 then are able to access the offers through the web-site 510.

HARDWARE OVERVIEW

FIG. 6 is a block diagram that illustrates a computer system 600 upon which an embodiment of the invention may be implemented. Computer system 600 includes

a bus 602 or other communication mechanism for communicating information, and a processor 604 coupled with bus 602 for processing information. Computer system 600 also includes a main memory 606, such as a random access memory (RAM) or other dynamic storage device, coupled to bus 602 for storing information and instructions to be executed by processor 604. Main memory 606 also may be used for storing temporary variables or other intermediate information during execution of instructions to be executed by processor 604. Computer system 600 further includes a read only memory (ROM) 608 or other static storage device coupled to bus 602 for storing static information and instructions for processor 604. A storage device 610, such as a magnetic disk or optical disk, is provided and coupled to bus 602 for storing information and instructions.

Computer system 600 may be coupled via bus 602 to a display 612, such as a cathode ray tube (CRT), for displaying information to a computer user. An input device 614, including alphanumeric and other keys, is coupled to bus 602 for communicating information and command selections to processor 604. Another type of user input device is cursor control 616, such as a mouse, a trackball, or cursor direction keys for communicating direction information and command selections to processor 604 and for controlling cursor movement on display 612. This input device typically has two degrees of freedom in two axes, a first axis (e.g., x) and a second axis (e.g., y), that allows the device to specify positions in a plane.

The invention is related to the use of computer system 600 for trading information. According to one embodiment of the invention, trading information is provided by computer system 600 in response to processor 604 executing one or more sequences of one or more instructions contained in main memory 606. Such instructions may be read into main memory 606 from another computer-readable medium, such as storage device 610. Execution of the sequences of instructions

contained in main memory 606 causes processor 604 to perform the process steps described herein. One or more processors in a multi-processing arrangement may also be employed to execute the sequences of instructions contained in main memory 606. In alternative embodiments, hard-wired circuitry may be used in place of or in combination with software instructions to implement the invention. Thus, embodiments of the invention are not limited to any specific combination of hardware circuitry and software.

The term "computer-readable medium" as used herein refers to any medium that participates in providing instructions to processor 604 for execution. Such a medium may take many forms, including but not limited to, non-volatile media, volatile media, and transmission media. Non-volatile media include, for example, optical or magnetic disks, such as storage device 610. Volatile media include dynamic memory, such as main memory 606. Transmission media include coaxial cables, copper wire and fiber optics, including the wires that comprise bus 602. Transmission media can also take the form of acoustic or light waves, such as those generated during radio frequency (RF) and infrared (IR) data communications. Common forms of computer-readable media include, for example, a floppy disk, a flexible disk, hard disk, magnetic tape, any other magnetic medium, a CD-ROM, DVD, any other optical medium, punch cards, paper tape, any other physical medium with patterns of holes, a RAM, a PROM, and EPROM, a FLASH-EPROM, any other memory chip or cartridge, a carrier wave as described hereinafter, or any other medium from which a computer can read.

Various forms of computer readable media may be involved in carrying one or more sequences of one or more instructions to processor 604 for execution. For example, the instructions may initially be borne on a magnetic disk of a remote computer. The remote computer can load the instructions into its dynamic memory

and send the instructions over a telephone line using a modem. A modem local to computer system 600 can receive the data on the telephone line and use an infrared transmitter to convert the data to an infrared signal. An infrared detector coupled to bus 602 can receive the data carried in the infrared signal and place the data on bus 602. Bus 602 carries the data to main memory 606, from which processor 604 retrieves and executes the instructions. The instructions received by main memory 606 may optionally be stored on storage device 610 either before or after execution by processor 604.

Computer system 600 also includes a communication interface 618 coupled to bus 602. Communication interface 618 provides a two-way data communication coupling to a network link 620 that is connected to a local network 622. For example, communication interface 618 may be an integrated services digital network (ISDN) card or a modem to provide a data communication connection to a corresponding type of telephone line. As another example, communication interface 618 may be a local area network (LAN) card to provide a data communication connection to a compatible LAN. Wireless links may also be implemented. In any such implementation, communication interface 618 sends and receives electrical, electromagnetic or optical signals that carry digital data streams representing various types of information.

Network link 620 typically provides data communication through one or more networks to other data devices. For example, network link 620 may provide a connection through local network 622 to a host computer 624 or to data equipment operated by an Internet Service Provider (ISP) 626. ISP 626 in turn provides data communication services through the worldwide packet data communication network, now commonly referred to as the "Internet" 628. Local network 622 and Internet 628 both use electrical, electromagnetic or optical signals that carry digital data streams. The signals through the various networks and the signals on network link 620 and

through communication interface 618, which carry the digital data to and from computer system 600, are exemplary forms of carrier waves transporting the information.

Computer system 600 can send messages and receive data, including program code, through the network(s), network link 620, and communication interface 618. In the Internet example, a server 630 might transmit a requested code for an application program through Internet 628, ISP 626, local network 622 and communication interface 618. In accordance with the invention, one such downloaded application provides for storing and retrieving persistent objects as described herein. The received code may be executed by processor 604 as it is received, and/or stored in storage device 610, or other non-volatile storage for later execution. In this manner, computer system 600 may obtain application code in the form of a carrier wave.

While this invention has been described in connection with what is presently considered to be the most practical and preferred embodiment, it is to be understood that the invention is not limited to the disclosed embodiment, but on the contrary, is intended to cover various modifications and equivalent arrangements included within the spirit and scope of the appended claims. The invention is capable of other and different embodiments and its several details are capable of modifications in various obvious respects, all without departing from the invention. Accordingly, the drawings and description are to be regarded as illustrative in nature, and not as restrictive.

CLAIMS

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method of trading information, comprising the steps:
receiving an offer requesting market research information about a good or service;
transmitting the offer to one or more consumers;
receiving the market research information from the one or more consumers;
and rewarding the one or more consumers.
2. The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of:
selecting the one or more consumers.
3. The method of claim 2, wherein the step of selecting the one or more consumers includes the step of:
determining if a privacy policy associated with a consumer prevents the offer from being transmitted to that consumer.
4. The method of claim 2, wherein the step of selecting the one or more consumers includes the steps of:
presenting an identification of the type of the offer;
presenting the identity of the business making the offer; and
presenting the terms of the offer.
5. A computer-based system for trading information comprising:

a receiver configured to receive an offer, the offer requesting market research information about a good or service;

a transmitter configured to forward the offer to one or more consumers; and

a transaction processor configured to:

receive the market research information from the one or more consumers; and reward the one or more consumers.

6. The system of claim 5, wherein the transaction processor is further configured to determine the one or more consumers.

7. The system of claim 5, wherein the transaction processor is further configured to determine if a privacy policy associated with a consumer prevents the offer from being transmitted to that consumer.

8. The system of claim 7, wherein the determination is based on at least one of a type of the offer, an identity of the business making the offer, and the terms of the offer.

9. The system of claim 5, wherein the transaction processor is further configured to receive compensation bids relating to the offer from the one or more consumers.

10. The system of claim 5, wherein the transmitter is further configured to transmit an offer for sale of the good or service to the one or more consumers.

11. A method of trading information, comprising the steps:

transmitting an offer requesting market research information about a product

or service to one or more consumers;

receiving compensation bids from the one or more consumers relating to the requested market research information;
receiving the market research information from the one or more consumers;
and rewarding the one or more consumers based on the received bids.

12. The method of claim 11, further comprising the step:

transmitting an offer for sale or advertisement of the product or service to the one or more consumers.

13. A method of formulating an offer for sale over a computer network comprising the steps:

transmitting an initial request for market research information to a first target audience;
rewarding select members of the first target audience who provide the market research information in response to the initial request;
refining another request for additional market research information based on the market research information received in response to the initial request;
transmitting the other request to a second target audience;
rewarding select members of the second target audience who provide data in response to the other request;
generating an offer for sale based on data received in response to the other request;
making the offer for sale to a third target audience; and
tracking acceptance and rejection of the offer for sale.

14. The method of claim 13, wherein tracking acceptance and rejection of the offer for sale includes the steps of:

- requesting further market research information related to the offer for sale;
- rewarding select members of the third target audience who provide further market research information related to the offer for sale;
- evaluating any further market research information provided; and
- specifying a new target audience based on the evaluated further market research information.

15. A computer based system for formulating an offer for sale over a computer network comprising:

- a transmitter configured to transmit an initial request for market research information, another request for market research information, and an offer for sale of a good or service;
- a transaction processor configured to reward consumers who provide market research information in response to the initial or other request; and
- a transaction analyzer coupled with the transaction processor and the transmitter and configured to:

- refine the other request for market information based on the market research information received in response to the initial request; and
 - generate the offer for sale based on the market research information received in response to the other request.

16. The system of claim 15, wherein:

the transmitter is further configured to transmit a further request for market research information with the offer for sale; and the transaction analyzer is further configured to:

evaluate market research information received in response to the further request; and specify a target audience.

17. A method of trading information, comprising the steps:

managing a database of consumers and associated consumer profiles and privacy policies;

receiving a specification of target consumers from a business;

selecting a target audience from the database based on the specification, the consumer profiles and the consumer privacy policies;

receiving an information offer from the business;

presenting the information offer to the target audience;

receiving responses, related to the information offer, from a subset of the target audience;

forwarding the responses to the business;

receiving compensation, related to the forwarded responses, from the business; and

presenting a portion of the received compensation to each member of the subset of the target audience.

18. The method of claim 17, further comprising the step:

forwarding the identities of the target audience to the business.

19. A web-based system which provides a marketplace for the exchange of market research information between a consumer and a business comprising:

- a database which stores a consumer profile and privacy policy associated with the consumer;

- a matching processor configured to:

- evaluate a specification for target consumers from the business; and
 - identify a target audience from the database based on the specification, the consumer profile, and the privacy policy;

- a receiver configured to receive an offer for market research information from the business;

- a trading processor configured to:

- forward the offer to the target audience;
 - receive replies related to the offer from members of the target audience;
 - forward the received replies to the business;
 - receive compensation related to the forwarded replies; and
 - provide a portion of the compensation to each of the members of the target audience.

20. An open marketing database system comprising:

- a consumer profile database;

- a transaction tracking database; and

- a web site configured to:

- receive an offer requesting market research information about a product or service;

transmit the offer to one or more consumers;
receive the market research information from the one or more
consumers; and reward the one or more consumers.

21. A method for trading information over a wireless network comprising the
steps:

providing a wireless communications device;
providing a connection between the wireless communications device and a
web site, the web site configured to:
receive an offer requesting market research information about a
product or service;
transmit the offer to one or more consumers;
receive the market research information from the one or more
consumers; and
reward the one or more consumers.

22. A computer readable medium bearing instructions for trading information,
said instructions being arranged to cause one or more processors upon execution
thereof to perform the steps of:

receiving an offer requesting market research information about a product or
service;
transmitting the offer to one or more consumers;
receiving the market research information from the one or more consumers;
and rewarding the one or more consumers.

23. A computer readable medium bearing instructions for trading information, said instructions being arranged to cause one or more processors upon execution thereof to perform the steps of:

transmitting an offer requesting market research information about a product or service to one or more consumers;

receiving bids from the one or more consumers relating to the requested market research information;

receiving the market research information from the one or more consumers; and rewarding the one or more consumers based on the received bids.

24. The computer readable medium of claim 23, said instructions being further arranged to cause one or more processors upon execution thereby to perform the step of transmitting an offer for sale or advertisement of the product or service to the one or more consumers.

25. A computer readable medium bearing instructions for formulating an offer for sale over a computer network, said instructions being arranged to cause one or more processors upon execution thereof to perform the steps of:

transmitting an initial request for market research information to a first target audience;

rewarding select members of the first target audience who provide the market research information in response to the initial request;

refining another request for additional market research information based on the market research information received in response to the initial request;

transmitting the other request to a second target audience;

rewarding select members of the second target audience who provide data in response to the other request;
generating an offer for sale based on data received in response to the other request;
making the offer for sale to a third target audience; and
tracking acceptance and rejection of the offer for sale.

26. The computer readable medium of claim 25, said instructions being further arranged to cause one or more processors upon execution thereby to perform the steps of:

requesting further market research information related to the offer for sale;
rewarding select members of the third target audience who provide further market research information related to the offer for sale;
evaluating any further market research information provided; and
specifying a new target audience based on the evaluated further market research information.

27. A computer readable medium bearing instructions for trading market research information, said instructions being arranged to cause one or more processors upon execution thereof to perform the steps of:

managing a database of consumers and associated consumer profiles and privacy policies;
receiving a specification for target consumers from a business;
selecting a target audience from the database based on the specification, the consumer profiles and the consumer privacy policies;

receiving an information offer from the business;
presenting the information offer to the target audience;
receiving responses, related to the information offer, from a subset of the
target audience;
forwarding the responses to the business;
receiving compensation, related to the forwarded responses, from the
business; and
presenting a portion of the received compensation to each member of the
subset of the target audience.

28. The computer readable medium of claim 27, said instructions being further
arranged to cause one or more processors upon execution thereby to perform the steps
of:

forwarding the identities of the target audience to the business.

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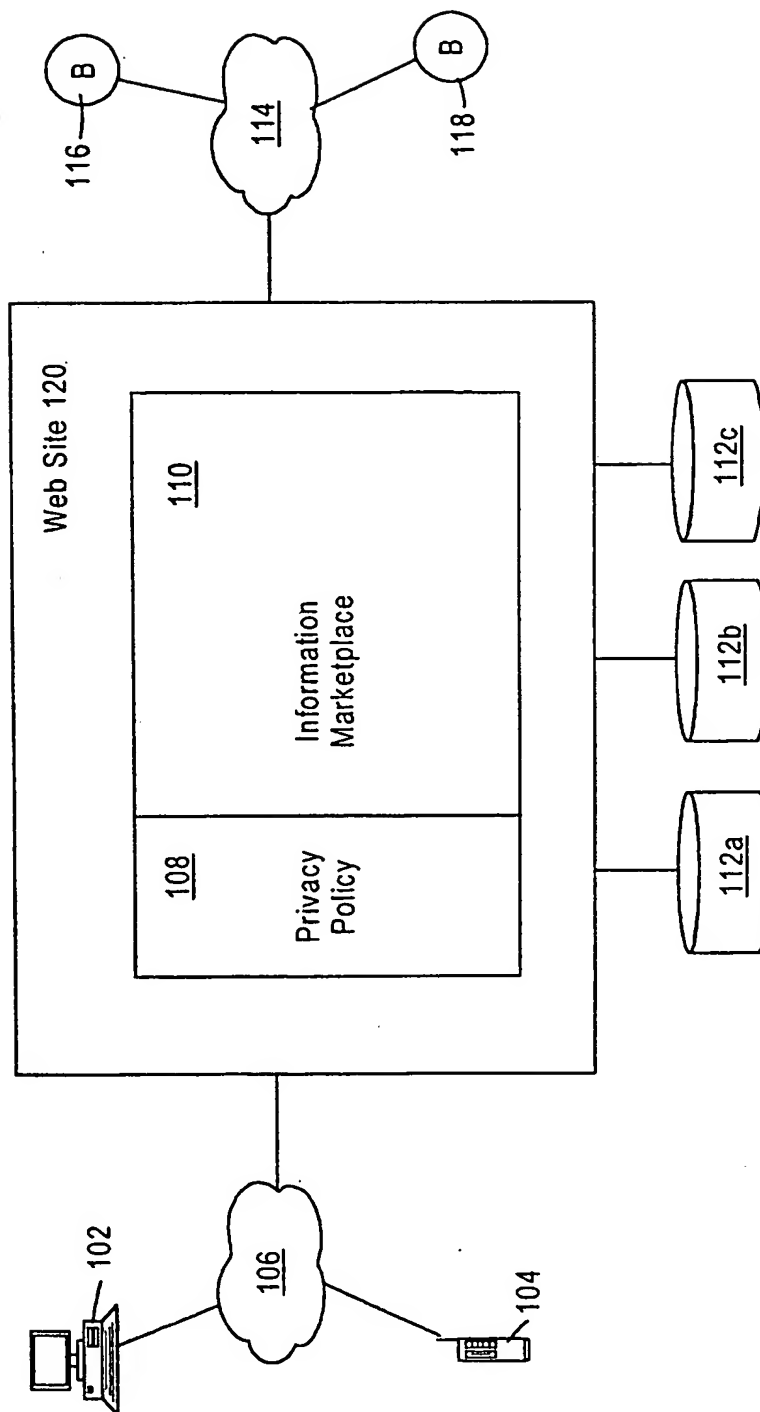


FIG. 1

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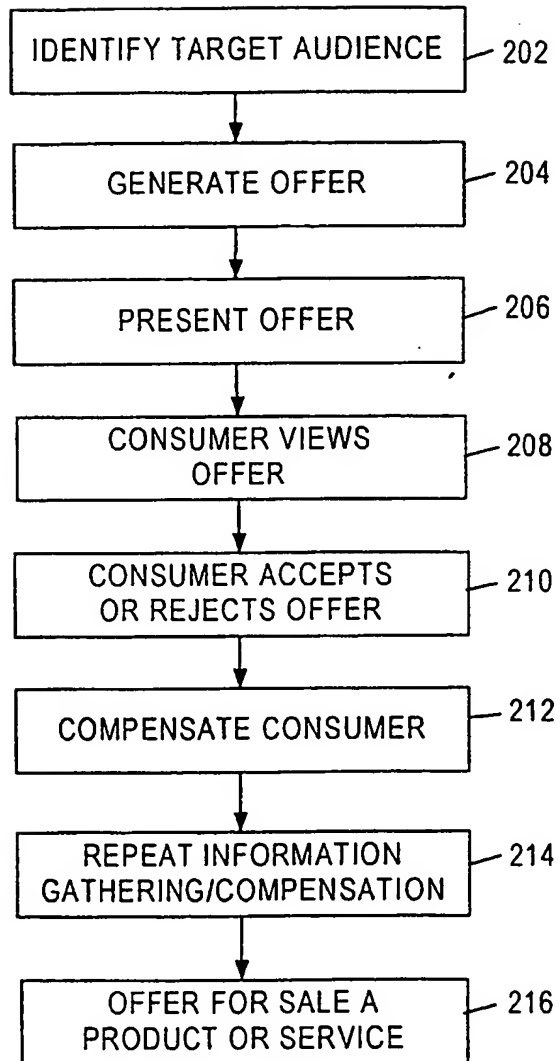


FIG. 2

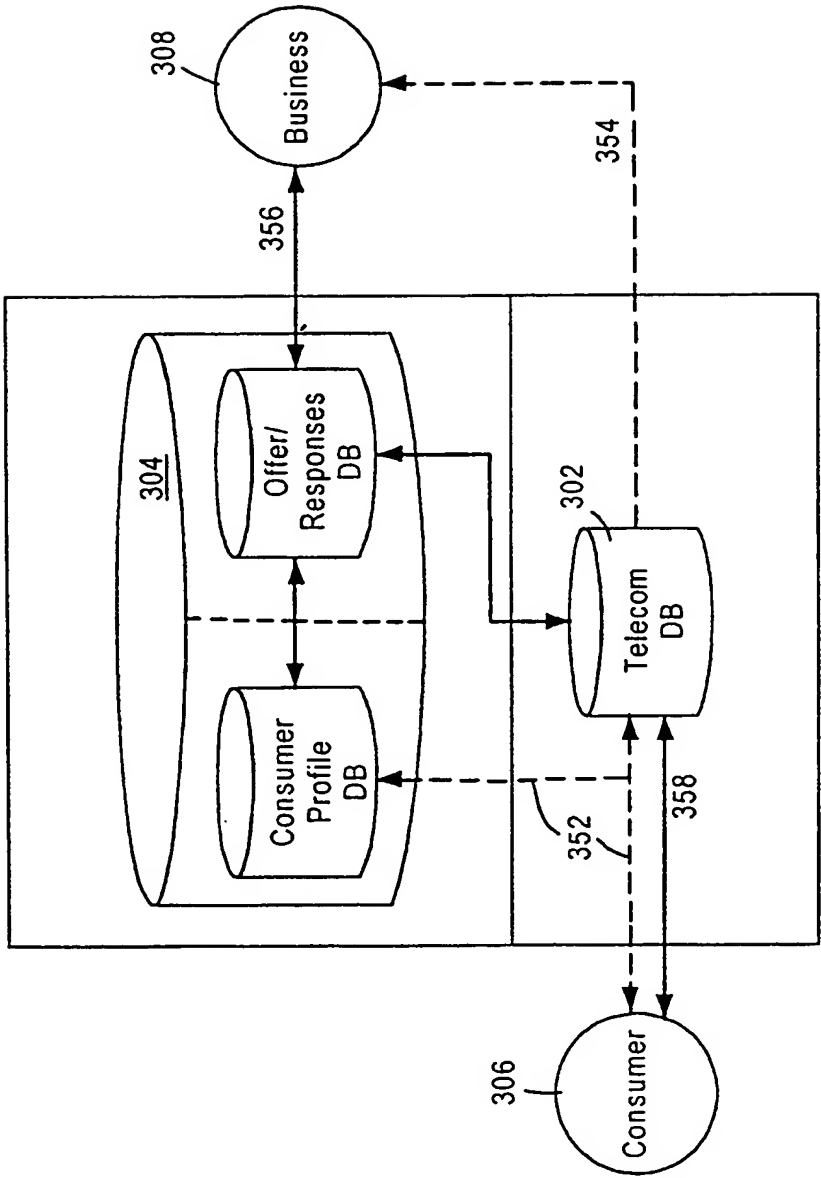


FIG. 3

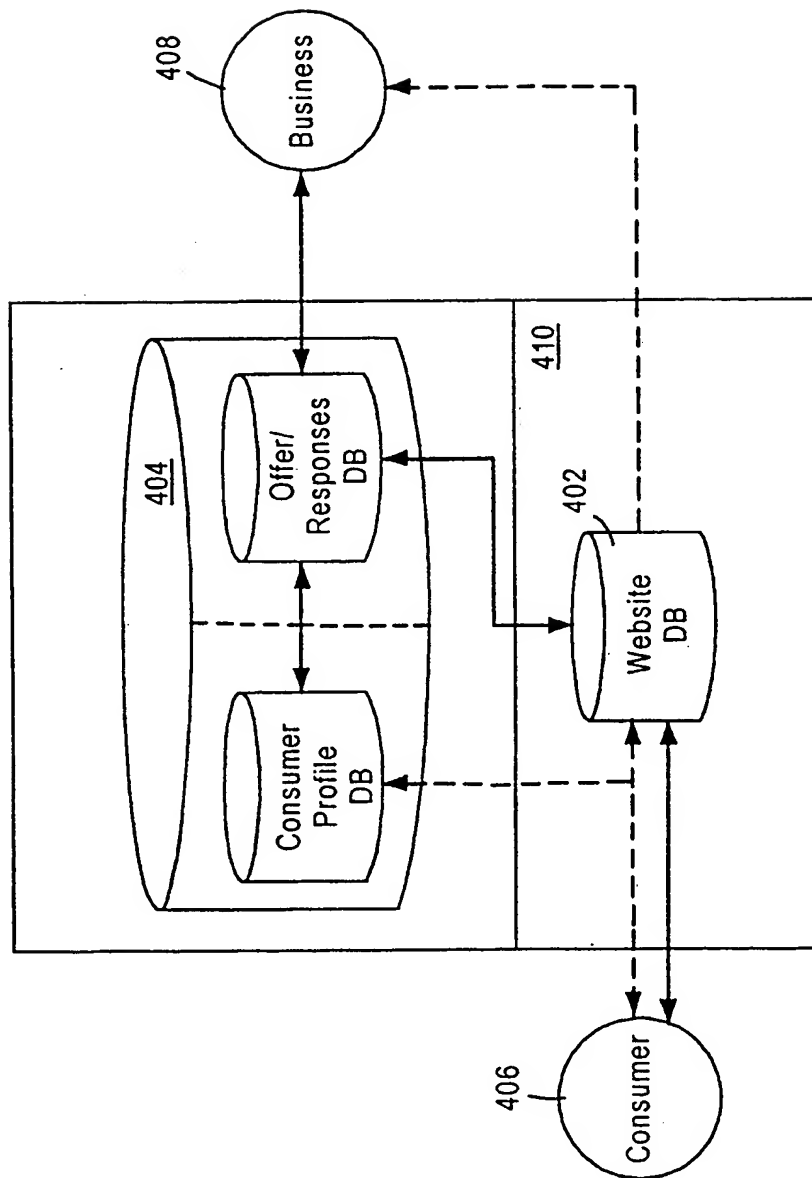


FIG. 4

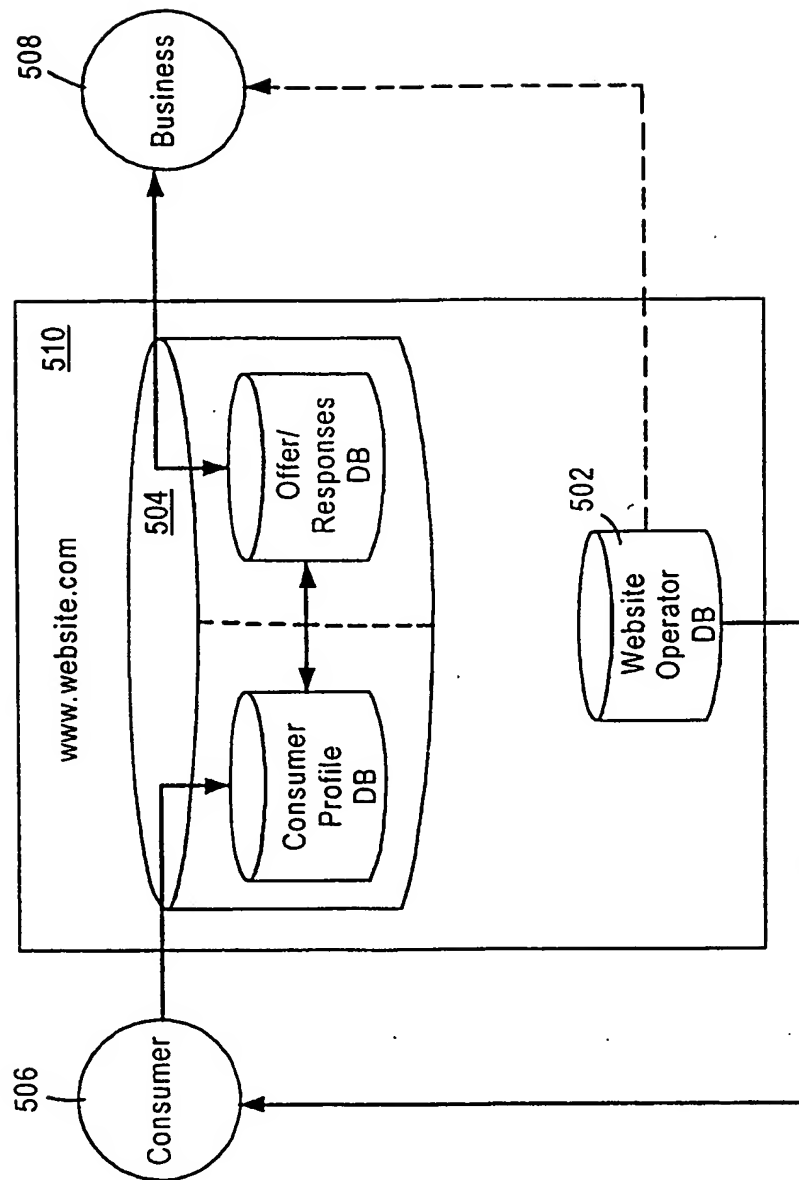


FIG. 5

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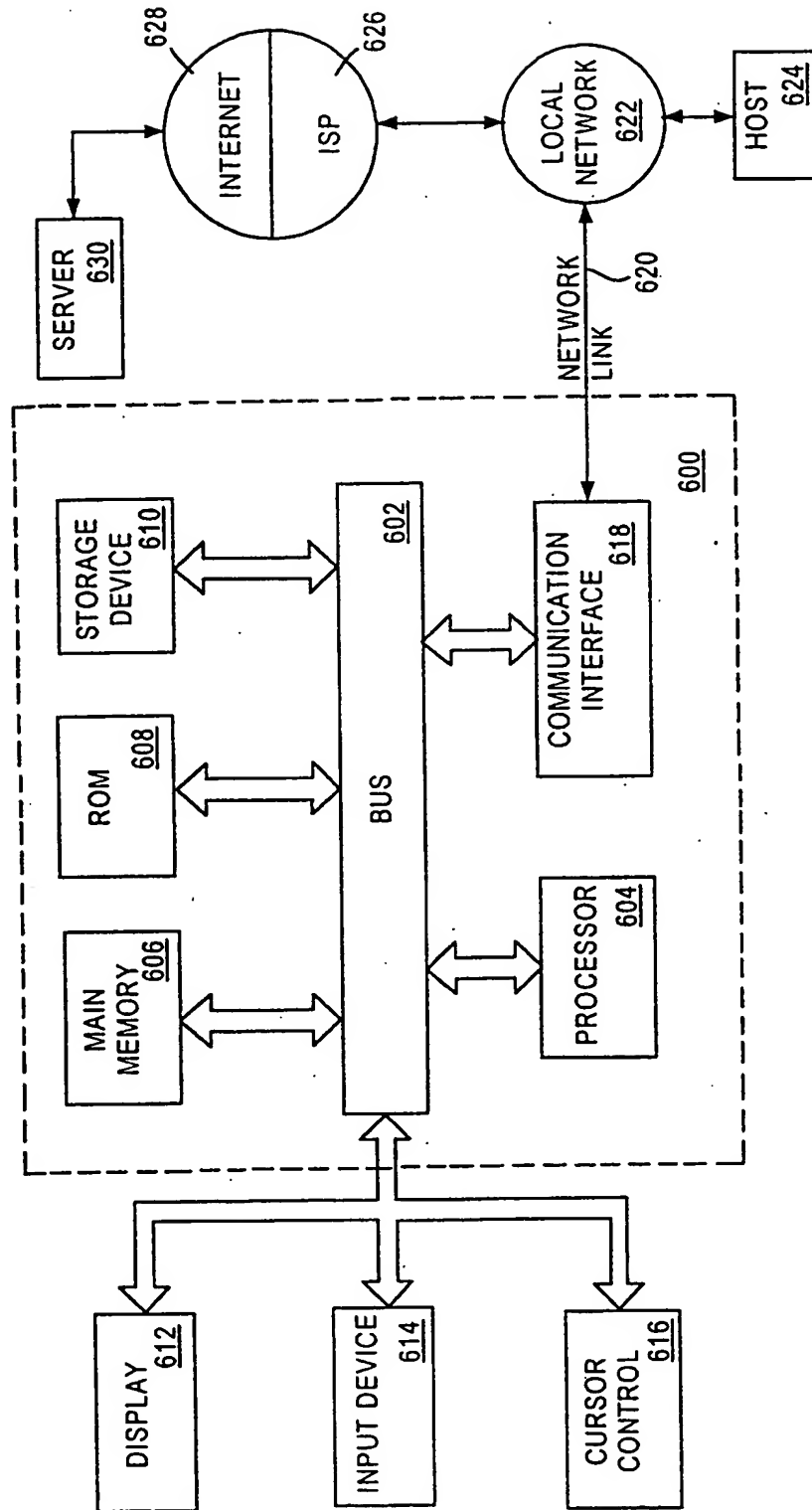


FIG. 6